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U.S. backing off on press warnings

Justice, White House shun issue

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Washington Bureau of The Sun

WASHINGTON — The Justice Department, keeping itself out of the campaign of the nation's top intelligence official to stop the press from publishing or even speculating about government secrets, has no plans — as yet — to prosecute any news organization.

The White House, while echoing the official's warning to reporters, also is trying to keep the issue at arm's length, at least for the time being. Senior officials are trying to assess the nature of the threat to national security posed by press disclosures and what should be done about it.

Officials at the Justice Department, while taking care not to discredit the efforts of CIA Director William J. Casey, say they are baffled about some of the tactics in his highly visible campaign — especially his unusual warning Wednesday to reporters covering the Baltimore trial of an accused spy, Ronald W. Pelton.

Their strongest effort, it appears, is to make it clear that the department is not involved. "This is not our turf, this is not our bailiwick," said one department aide.

"We are obviously a critical player" in the government-wide effort to crack down on the leaking of government secrets, a department aide said. But he agreed cautiously with a reporter's suggestion that the department generally does not think much of the idea of going after a news organization in a criminal case.

Although he stressed that there was no firm, general policy against starting a criminal case against a newspaper or broadcast outlet and that the department will "take each case at a time" when secrets have been published, he said that "an inference" could be drawn from the fact that no case has yet been started.

So far as is known, no federal prosecutors or grand juries have even been asked to look into any specific instance of publishing secrets.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

WILLIAM J. CASEY
Regrets choice of words

The department's top official on criminal matters, Assistant Attorney General Stephen S. Trott, has said several times that he believes federal laws designed to protect official secrets could be used against news organizations, if a proper case came along.

The aim appears to be to leave the option open, perhaps as a kind of check upon news organizations' willingness to receive government secrets from official sources.

At the Justice Department, the inclination now is to support efforts in the government to find government officials or employees who leak secrets to the press, and have them fired. One department aide noted that his agency thinks that the State Department and the Defense Department "took the right approach" when they recently fired two aides for having leaked to the press.

At the White House, a spokesman, Edward P. Djerejian, publicly expressed support yesterday for Mr. Casey's warning to the press on the Pelton trial.

However, a senior aide said that while there was a consensus among President Reagan's top advisers that unauthorized disclosures in the national security area are a problem, the seriousness of the problem had not yet been determined. He said there was even less agreement among senior aides on what to do about the leaks if and when it is established that the situation requires official action.

Regarding Mr. Casey's activities, which he referred to as the "Casey initiative," the official said it would be "premature" to say how much support the CIA chief had within the White House.

"There's not universal endorsement," the official said. "But that doesn't mean there won't be. People are open and willing to listen."

On that same point, another senior Reagan aide said it would be correct to describe the White House as taking an arm's-length position, but added, "I think it would be mistaken to think that Casey's position is without support here."

The second official, who said he personally was convinced that the administration had a serious problem with unauthorized disclosures, was asked whether he would go along with the creation of a special FBI unit to ferret out leakers, a suggestion said to be contained in a list of possible actions compiled by a National Security Council staffer.

"I think we ought to . . . use whatever legitimate methods and means we have to run them down and get these people out of here," he replied.

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